

EDITORIAL

MGM plan offers more hope for Springfield's renewal

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IN ITS eager embrace of casinos, the City of Springfield is betting on an unprecedented comeback. Like many smaller cities in Massachusetts, Springfield has been battered by decades of decline, leaving vacant storefronts downtown, faded blocks of Victorian housing, high poverty rates, and a pervasive sense that the city's glory days are behind it. But now, with a warm welcome from the city, two casino companies have submitted detailed plans for downtown sites. The mayor, Domenic J. Sarno — who may back one of the plans as soon as Monday — envisions a new casino sparking economic development across the whole city, enriching its cultural life and attracting new residents.

It's an unproven strategy. The existing casino model in New England, honed at the Connecticut resorts Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun, has been for developers to bury casinos deep in the woods. One of the rival casino proposals in Western Massachusetts, near the Mass. Pike in Palmer, hews closer to that template. Urban casinos are not unheard of — Cleveland and Philadelphia each have them — but there is no model for a small city riding a single casino to revitalization.

In seeking to break the mold, the city deserves a chance to devise the the best possible proposal to put before its own voters and ultimately the state Gaming Commission. Sarno and his team have been admirably diligent in trying to connect the casino plans to other city priorities, such as increasing the number of events at the Mass. Mutual Center arena and the number of concerts and plays at the city's impressive Greek Revival-style Symphony Hall, an icon from the city's heyday.

The risks of opening a casino in the middle of a small, poor city speak for themselves. It would plant gambling in a community that can least afford to cope with the potential costs in crime and addiction. A casino could easily overwhelm the city's

relatively small downtown area, drowning the city in neon and scaring away other possible users, the way Atlantic City remains a ghost town outside its casino areas. With casino money already sloshing around Springfield, the potential for political corruption is visible. And the plans would yoke Springfield's reputation to the mercies of a corporate casino operator. If the Springfield casino ended up being a seedy operation, it could be an albatross around the city's neck for a generation.

That's why Springfield voters, who will ultimately have their say on any casino deal, should scrutinize the dueling casino plans based not only on what amenities the gambling firms are promising, but on how they will improve the city's economic future, particularly in attracting or retaining non-gambling businesses.

Both proposals would occupy partially vacant or underused parcels, and both promise to create partnerships with existing city institutions like Symphony Hall. The \$807 million proposal by Penn National would transform the current site of the Springfield

Republican newspaper into a hotel, spa, conference space, and casino with 2,850 slot machines and 20 table games. It would be connected seamlessly to Union Station, which is currently undergoing renovation. But the site, north of downtown, is separated from the rest of the city by railroad tracks.

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The \$850 million MGM plan, which would occupy several blocks of the South End near the Basketball Hall of Fame, presents a better vision — one farther removed from the hulking, inward-looking style of casino long prevalent in Las Vegas. The MGM proposal would include a hotel, 3,100 slot machines, 100 tables, a movie theater, restaurants, and a bowling alley. Rather than bulldozing the site, the plan calls for reusing existing architectural elements, including the castle-like facade from the old State Armory that was damaged in the 2011 tornado. And the MGM blueprint would create multiple points of entry, knitting the project more closely into the fabric of the city. If any casino project can really revitalize a city, the MGM plan is more likely to be it.

The city's decision will not be the final word; even if Sarno and the city's voters approve the MGM plan, the state gambling commission could still turn it down in favor of one of the other Western Massachusetts plans. The commissioners will also need to bear in mind the larger economic-development context. One of the guiding

principles of casino gambling in Massachusetts has been that it should do more than simply add dollars to the state's coffers. To the greatest extent possible, the three casinos and slots parlor allowed under the law should be leveraged to support other policy goals. Revitalizing the state's long-suffering gateway cities is a clear priority. If the gambling commission is satisfied that a casino can really help a city like Springfield, commissioners should factor that into their decisions.

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